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Identifying and Responding to Child Neglect within Schools: Differing Perspectives and the Implications for Inter-Agency Practice

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Abstract

Child neglect is the most common reason for a child to be placed on the child protection register in Wales. Due to their central position within the community, schools provide opportunities for staff to observe children's interactions with peers and family members, five days a week, over an extended period of time and development. Although literature acknowledges schools as pivotal sites for the identification of child maltreatment, little is known about the manner in which school staff recognise and respond to child neglect in their roles. This paper brings new understanding about the way in which child neglect is identified by school staff in Wales. The mixed method research design comprises two phases: quantitative social work case file analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. This paper presents two key findings from the thirty interviews with staff in mainstream schools undertaken within the second phase of the study. Findings emphasise the presence of differing professional perspectives between school staff and social services: firstly the identification of child neglect within the boundaries of the school, and secondly the interprofessional challenges which exist for school staff when responding to child neglect. Findings have important implications for future policy and practice in the delivery of school-based service provision, and broader messages for the development of effective inter-professional relationships between staff in all universal services and statutory services when supporting and protecting children who are suspected of living with neglect.

Keywords Child neglect · Child maltreatment · Schools · Social work · Mixed methods · Teachers · Interprofessional working

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1 Introduction

In Wales, child neglect is the most common reason for taking child protection action. In 2017, 1090 children were registered on the child protection register for neglect alone, with a further 120 children registered for neglect with a secondary category of physical and/or sexual abuse (Stats Wales 2018). This figure accounts for 41% of all registration categories in Wales between 2017 and 2018. Child neglect is widely recognised as a chronic and pervasive public health issue, often considered to be the most complex form of child maltreatment rarely based upon a specific incident (Action for Children 2010; Daniel et al. 2009). Instead, neglect is usually broad-based with a myriad of causes and indicators (Daniel et al. 2011; Horwath 2007). This makes providing the appropriate type and level of support to a child a substantial challenge for practice. With increasing burdens on the child protection system, social services are required to perform as an emergency service, whilst early intervention and prevention services are being progressively stretched (Haynes 2015). That said, intervening in neglect at the earliest opportunity not only serves to minimise the long-term and dangerous effects on children, but also saves the cost of reactive services to the public purse (Stevens and Laing 2015).

Professionals in universal services are well-positioned to recognise the signs of neglect in its earliest stages (Haynes et al. 2015) and able to take a shared approach in responding to the issue as effectively as possible. Staff within schools hold particular advantage, as schools possess long-standing interactions with children between the ages of 4 to 16 years old and their families, playing a consistent role in their lives (Daniel et al. 2009, 2010). Teaching staff form an important part of the wider safeguarding system for children (NSPCC 2016; Welsh Government 2015), whilst non-teaching staff hold the added benefit of observing children both inside and outside of the classroom, and in informal contexts such as breakfast or afterschool clubs, the canteen, or during break-times interacting with friends.

In 2013, the Welsh Government funded the Welsh Neglect Project (WNP), which was a two-year collaboration between Action for Children (Gweithredu dros Blant) and the National Society for the Prevention of Child Cruelty (NSPCC, Cymru/Wales). In the first year, the project scoped key areas for multi-agency action exploring practitioners' responses to child neglect. The WNP investigated neglect-practice in the statutory sector including the use of tools, protocols, multi-agency working, relationships with families, and decision making and planning (Pithouse and Crowley 2016). The study comprised semi-structured telephone interviews with the local authority-led safeguarding children's boards (LSCBs) across Wales, a desk survey and document analysis of LSCBs' tools and protocols, together with focus groups with participants from a range of professional backgrounds and acknowledged joint working across disciplines as one of the biggest challenges to working with child neglect (Pithouse and Crowley 2016). The WNP highlighted the need for increased integration and co-location of services, knowledge transfer amongst staff, specific opportunities for reflection on practice, secondment openings across agencies and the desired increase in pooled resources (Daniel et al. 2010). Communication and inter-agency practice between social services and schools was recognised as a particular difficulty (Baginsky 2008), with staff in schools acknowledged as being vital for the early identification and intervention in cases of suspected neglect (Stevens and Laing 2015).

2 The Welsh Context

Social welfare in Wales, including the governance of social services and the protection and well-being of children, became a devolved matter for the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 (Drakeford and Gregory 2011; Williams 2011). The Welsh Government is responsible for the delivery of child protection services. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) is an international agreement implemented to protect the rights of children, which introduces the fundamental principle that the protection of children from harm is the responsibility of everyone working with children and their families (Welsh Government 2015). The Convention includes the right of the child to protection from abuse, and to care and services for children with a disability or children living away from home. The UNCRC was ratified by the United Kingdom Government in 1991 and consists of 45 articles. In 2011, Wales became the first administration in the UK to enshrine the principles of the UNCRC with a legislative mandate - the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure (2010), imposing a duty in Welsh Law for all Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the rights and obligations set out in the agreement when making decisions (Holt 2014), whilst also validating the role of the State in the intervention in family life when an individual's rights are being contravened. Social workers therefore have a dual mandate - causing tension in practice - to both support and protect children from harm in all areas of their lives, whilst also exerting control over families whose parenting is considered to be inadequate or harmful under duties set out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) and associated guidance.

The recent implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) (SSWB Act) in 2016 significantly altered the way social services and safeguarding procedures are governed in Wales. The Act and its associated policy framework primarily focuses upon people's well-being, their rights and responsibilities (Welsh Government 2015). The Act gives emphasis to early intervention services, increasing provision within the community to reduce the escalation of acute need (Social Care Wales 2017). It does this by placing a responsibility on local authorities to implement preventative provision (s.15) which responds to the identified needs of specific groups. All local authorities in Wales hold a statutory duty under the Act to safeguard children in their areas by 'providing services for a child or someone other than the child who has needs for care and support' (SSWB Act 2014, s.21(2), s.37(2) and s.38(1,2,4)). The SSWB Act governs child protection practice in Wales, and the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016, have introduced a more robust framework for a partnership-approach to safeguarding children (Welsh Government 2017). This approach fits with the core principal of safeguarding which states it is everyone's responsibility to protect the safety and well-being of children (Welsh Assembly Government 2006).

The SSWB Act (2014) highlights an important legislative transition in Wales from previous notions of 'welfare' (as outlined in The Children Act 1989) to the concept of people's 'well-being' in contemporary policy. It does this by assigning a duty on persons exercising functions under the Act to seek to 'promote the well-being of people who need care and support' (s.5). The legislation also introduces a 'people' model and describes a child as a person who has a need for care and support under the legislation (Social Care Legislation in Wales 2017a, b). Elements of 'well-being' are defined in the

Act as ‘physical and mental health and emotional well-being’ and the need for ‘protection from abuse and neglect’, not only in ‘domestic, family and social relationships’ but also within the person’s ‘education, training and recreation’. The recent shift in legislative emphasis delivered by the SSWB Act provides a timely and constructive framework for the findings in this study. The prominence of ‘well-being’ set out by the Act promotes a need to understand happiness, comfort and security as an all-encompassing and holistic notion which incorporates all areas of children’s. The emphasis upon well-being provides an overarching policy model which is congruent with the early and preventative focus of this research study and the promotion of effective and early identification of and intervention in child neglect in schools.

Keeping Learners Safe (Welsh Government 2015b) is the key policy document in Wales which provides guidance to schools and colleges about safeguarding children. The policy reiterates the shared responsibility for safeguarding children (NSPCC 2016), highlighting the importance of professionals working together (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence 2017) and sharing information to establish a comprehensive picture of children’s needs. The guidance explicitly refers to staff in schools and colleges as forming the wider safeguarding system for children, and emphasises the importance of schools working closely with other agencies in a co-ordinated manner, particularly social care, police and health services. The policy document aims to direct all staff in education services to ensure they have the appropriate systems in place to create and maintain a safe learning environment for children, setting-out responsibility to identify any safeguarding concerns and for the action needed to address them, where appropriate, in partnership with the relevant agencies (Welsh Government 2015). The guidance supports education providers to promote the welfare of children and young people in Wales. It is issued under section 175 of the Education Act 2002, and sets out accountabilities for all education institutions in their safeguarding duties, stating that local authorities and education institutions ‘must have regard’ for the purposes of meeting their duties under the guidance, and should undertake their functions in a way that recognises the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (Welsh Government 2015).

3 The Significance of the School

Child neglect is among a wide range of problems that present potential barriers to effective learning and teaching (Adelman 2014). One of the key ways that neglect is demonstrated is in the impact it has upon a child’s attainment and attendance at school (Daniel 2008). Indicators often include hunger, inadequate clothing, missed appointments or health checks, poor hygiene, persistent lateness (Daniel 2005), educational absence, or children presenting with cognitive or emotional delay, all of which can be observed in schools. Wider factors such as substance or alcohol use, learning disability, mental health problems, or domestic violence and abuse in the family, all increase the likelihood of a child experiencing neglect, and can potentially be detected by school staff during interactions between the child and their parents. It is for this reason that schools are pivotal sites for the identification and intervention in child neglect (Stevens and Laing 2015).

Staff in schools are often adults who are most consistently present in a child's life, having a significant effect upon their emotional, social and cognitive development. It is widely recognised that children are unable to learn successfully unless their basic needs have been met (Perry 2001). This places a responsibility for pastoral care upon schools to ensure the overall well-being and safety of pupils throughout their education. School staff are in a unique position to notice early indicators of neglect by detecting changes in a child's behaviour and interactions, and monitoring their developmental and educational milestones so as to contribute to successful prevention (Baginsky 2003; Briggs and Hawkins 1998; Crosson-Tower 2003; Hawtin and Wyse 1998; Whitney 1993). Alongside social and health services, the education service has had a long-standing and important role in safeguarding the welfare of its pupils (Baginsky and Macpherson 2005). The school's role has become more formalised since the introduction of the Children Act 1989 with local authorities in England and Wales having a duty to safeguard the welfare of the children within their area through a coordinated interdisciplinary approach (Welsh Government 2015). Each school in Wales has a Designated Senior Person (DSP) with a responsibility for child protection concerns, and within local authorities there is an education liaison role attached to social services.

Although schools play a crucial role in the protection of children, there is little known about what level, and in what form, the safeguarding role is being exercised by staff as a collective group when responding to concerns of child neglect. Walsh et al. (2008) suggest that an increasing awareness of child neglect interrogates the current level of safeguarding training and preparation presently received by teaching professionals, with the most significant barrier to educators effectively reporting abuse and neglect being a lack of training or knowledge in detection or reporting procedures (Abrahams et al. 1992; Naregal et al. 2015). With a shift in public concern generated from a number of high-profile enquiries into child deaths (CYUSR Mid and West Wales Safeguarding Children Board 2015; Johnson 2004; Munro 2005), attentiveness around the importance of ensuring appropriate educational responses to safeguarding children continues to grow (Burnett and Greenwald O'Brien 2007). Research into teacher training, although somewhat limited in the United Kingdom, raises questions about how adequately teachers are prepared for the contribution they could make in identifying child abuse and neglect within the school setting (Abrahams et al. 1992; Hodgkinson and Baginsky 2000; McKee and Dillenburg 2009).

Emphasis has instead been placed upon in-service or post-qualification child protection training for staff, highlighting a paucity of pre-service training for student teachers and newly-qualified teachers - despite having had annual field placements (McKee and Dillenburg 2009; Hodgkinson and Baginsky 2000). Further, newly-qualified teachers report not feeling prepared to respond to, or deal effectively with, childhood trauma on entering practice due to the lack of training they received during their qualifying courses (Baginsky 2001; Baginsky and Macpherson 2005; Walsh et al. 2005). Although many teachers are aware of the signs of child abuse and neglect, under-reporting of the issue is still common (Goebbels et al. 2008) where teachers - particularly in primary schools (Schols et al. 2013; Webster et al. 2005) - fail to report suspected abuse or neglect to statutory agencies (Kesner and Robinson 2002).

Although the successful and prompt recognition of child neglect is largely dependent upon the effectiveness of the relationship between schools and social services, literature continues to acknowledge the interprofessional liaison between the two fields of

responsibility as considerably problematic (Holland et al. 2013; Stevens and Laing 2015; Webster et al. 2005). Barriers to effective interdisciplinary practice include inter-agency communication, information sharing and difficult inter-professional relationships (Webster et al. 2005). In particular, schools report long waiting times for responses to safeguarding referrals from social care agencies (Baginsky 2000). Conversely, social care agencies report the inappropriate nature of referrals received from the field of education, citing reports as not ‘serious enough’ to meet thresholds for social services’ intervention (Zellman and Antler 1990). King and Scott (2012) go further in reporting much higher rates of ‘unsubstantiated’ cases being received from the field of education than from any other agency, with professional responses to child abuse and neglect by school staff investigated less frequently than responses by other professionals (Abrahams et al. 1992; Tite 1993). This is surprising, given that schools report the greatest number of cases of neglect and abuse to child protection services than any other type of agency. Likewise, teachers are widely accepted as being the largest source for under-reporting child abuse and neglect (Crenshaw et al. 1995), and also the most under-represented group on multi-agency panels and conferences and at training sessions (Baginsky 2008), which could suggest the prioritisation of heavy teaching loads and government attainment targets, rather than a ‘lack of interest’ in safeguarding concerns (Baginsky 2000).

4 Method

This study provides new evidence and understanding about how staff in mainstream schools identify and respond to child neglect. It investigates the extent of involvement of schools in neglect-practice by exploring school staff’s individual experiences across a range of teaching and non-teaching roles. The study employed an explanatory two-phase design (Creswell 2003; Gorard and Taylor 2004; Teater et al. 2017), and began with analysis of a numeric data set compiled from social work cases files ($n = 119$) from three local authorities in Wales. During the first phase of the study data was collected from seven documents on 119 children’s social work files. The quantitative sample included the fifty most recent case files in each local authority, where the child was of school age, the school was the referring agency to social services, and the child had been registered on the child protection register under the category of neglect.

This paper presents the findings from the second phase of the study which comprised of six in-depth qualitative case studies, in one primary and one secondary school from each of the three local authorities participating in the study ($n = 6$). Composite methods in the second phase included semi-structured interviews with school staff ($n = 30$) together with non-participant observation of school-based meetings ($n = 5$). Meetings or exchanges which provided an opportunity for staff to report or discuss concerns about a child and make decisions about providing support were identified by the school’s head teacher (one school was unable to provide an opportunity during the duration of the study). The second phase of the study was informed by data collected during the first phase in two distinct ways. Firstly, the purposive method in which the case study schools were identified was informed by inferential statistics generated from the quantitative analysis of social work case files during phase one. Schools in the sample that reported the highest levels of referral activity to social services were identified as the most desirable schools to approach

for participation. Secondly, the vignettes used in the interviews with school staff were created from descriptive statistics drawn from referrals made by schools in the social work case file sample ($n = 119$). Descriptive statistics and string data were used to create realistic examples of the most commonly cited, and least commonly cited concerns of neglect identified in the school-setting.

Ethical approval was obtained from Cardiff University's Research Ethics Committee, together with access approval from the Directors of Children's Services in the three participating local authorities. In the second qualitative phase, individual permissions to undertake interviews and observations with school staff were sought from the Head Teachers in each of the six schools. An interview schedule was designed to elicit five areas of conversation; the first theme introduced the researcher, the purpose of the study and supported a discussion around informed consent. The second theme focused upon the staff member's role, background and experience, including professional qualifications and training. The third theme explored staff's understandings of child neglect, individual experiences, and the way they responded to concerns in their individual role: vignettes were employed as an analytical tool during interviews to deepen discussions, and gather understanding about how staff identified and responded to child neglect in their daily roles to support analysis of individual practice. The fourth theme discussed staff's use of professional support and guidance, and in the final theme, staff were asked about their relationships with families. The schedule was piloted with two school-based professionals who were not connected to the study and interviews were audio-recorded providing an opportunity to test the schedule prior to data collection commencing (in 2015 and concluding in 2016). All interviews and observations took place on school premises in a private room, within the school-day to limit disruption to participants' commitments. Each lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Participants ($n = 30$) were drawn from both teaching and non-teaching roles with the aim of including staff who have contact with children inside and outside of the classroom from five different role categories with the purpose of reducing bias and promoting diversity: (i) management and strategic staff, (ii) teaching staff, (iii) pastoral staff, (iv) education-support staff, and (v) support and administrative staff. Half of the participants were from primary schools and half were from secondary schools. Fifteen of the participants were qualified teachers who were currently in teaching, specialist, or managerial roles in the school. Eight participants were in learning assistant roles (LSA), with the remaining seven holding administrative or supporting roles including office managers, administrators, lunchtime supervisors, and school crossing patrol. Twenty-three of the participants were female, six were male. Eight held a child protection designation as part of their role responsibility. Interviews were transcribed and data was thematically analysed by generating initial codes, searching for themes, and then reviewing themes in accordance with Braun and Clark's (2006) six-stage model. Themes which were considered important in answering the study's research questions were refined and defined (Taylor and Ussher 2001). Findings from all three composite methods were combined in a complementary manner through the process of triangulation (Bryman 2012; Creswell and Plano Clark 2007; Teater et al. 2017). The grouping of methods intended to produce different perspectives on how schools work with child neglect (Gorard 2002) by concatenating data from three different vantage points (Kelle 2001): (i) what staff were *saying* (interviews), (ii) what staff were *doing* (non-participant observation), and (iii) what staff were *recording* (case file analysis) (Floersch 2000) about their neglect-practice.

5 Key Findings

This paper presents two themes which emerged from the interviews and observations undertaken with staff in schools across three local authorities in Wales. The data from the interviews offered understanding about *what* staff said about their practice, whilst the non-participant observations provided complementary knowledge and insight into *how* practice was undertaken in schools. The first theme is concerned with how staff identified neglect and the legitimisation of actually *seeing* neglect during the constraints of the school day. In the second theme notions of professionalism emerge, with findings emphasising the challenge of how staff responded to neglect, drawing particular attention to the interprofessional relationships in the midst of social work recruitment and retention, consistency of advice, and differing understandings of threshold levels for service intervention.

5.1 Identifying Neglect in Schools

All staff spoke about how they were principally drawn to the *observable presentation* of a child when looking for the presence of neglect. Staff noticed the absence of climate-appropriate or well-fitting clothing at school, saw dirt and grime on a child's body at the start of the week and spoke about actually being able to 'see' hunger or distress. Many staff talked about the visibility of these indicators of neglect on children at school in terms of their ability to 'see' different forms of neglect. A Class teacher stated, *'I see children who are hungry...children who are visibly, very hungry in the morning...children who run up and grab food. Also, when children are very grubby; I know children are generally going to be a little bit you know 'mucked up'...but some children...are very you know...visibly...around their neck'*.

Although there was limited reference to the issue of emotional neglect, when mentioned this was in the context of staff being able to *see* the emotions in the child's face and being able to observe their emotional vulnerability whilst at school or in lessons. A police school liaison officer demonstrates this perception as he talks about 'seeing' a child's emotions from a distance and observing the significant change in the child's usual demeanour, *'You can see her from fifty metres away, you can see by her face, how she's feeling; where she is; what's going on for her. You don't know them by name, but you'll notice...it's that change in demeanour; it's a change in clothing, a change in body language, a change in eye contact, how they say things'*. Indicators of emotional neglect on children within the classroom were identified when a child was significantly withdrawn and isolated or crying and displaying unhappiness or anger. A Teaching Assistant states *'It can be emotional [neglect], you can have a child who is upset, cries a lot, or sometimes may seem withdrawn and doesn't include themselves in things, a child who may be angry, could be angry because they are hungry...So they can't concentrate, so again that can be lack of food, lack of sleep'*. Here the visible emotions of the child with a suspected cause i.e. anger or tiredness, which is often attributed by staff to concerns of hunger or nutritional neglect, and withdrawal and aloneness in the classroom, attributed to potential concerns that a child is living with emotional neglect.

Horwath and Tarr (2015) suggest that careful consideration is necessary in giving attention to how professionals appear to construct the child experiencing neglect,

whether deliberately or not. Their study, funded by a Welsh Local Safeguarding Children Board, highlights the importance of understanding the views and experiences of the child in cases of neglect, identifying that the cause of the problem is seldom a single event. They caution practitioners to be consciously reflexive over the power of labelling children. How a child is labelled as ‘neglected’ can obscure understanding about the child’s experience of ‘living with neglect’ (2015; 1389). By focusing on little more than the observable indicators, practitioners can be led to the construction of a ‘neglected child’ as a superficial gathering of physical signs without having meaningfully engaged with the child’s daily experience of living with the impact of neglect (Horwath 2016).

Despite the recommendation that practitioners need to focus less on observable indicators and more on the experience of neglect for the child (Horwath and Tarr 2015), the data shows that school staff continue to place considerable weight upon what they can ‘see’. Many participants express considerable frustration at being unable to communicate their concerns clearly, and speak of substantial difficulty in conveying concerns of child neglect which they felt were rooted in professional intuition rather than evidence (Thompson 2016). The previous extracts refer to staff’s need to ‘see’ physical evidence of neglect on a child, which they articulated with clarity, with the purpose of gathering tangible proof that could validate and justify the thoughts and fears held. Staff also talk about the process of monitoring neglect over a period of time (Thompson 2016), and gathering information in terms of building a picture about the child so as to legitimise their decision to refer to social services (Davies and Ward 2012).

5.1.1 Decision to Refer to Social Services

A number of participants shared their assumptions about how they expected social workers to respond and how this also informed their decision to refer to social services. Congruent with literature, participants speak about the struggle of effectively describing and conceptualising worries to external agencies when a child appears to be living with neglect. Neglect is discussed as being an exasperating and challenging issue to define (Kesner and Robinson 2002:229). A Teacher (in her role as Additional Learning Needs Coordinator) states, *‘I think the difficulty is that we would say there is such a crossover between the physical/ emotional/sexual and neglect. So do we refer for neglect mostly? Yes; and physical - perhaps for you know a bruise or something like that. But [neglect] it’s much harder to say prove, it’s much harder to describe’*. This point is further demonstrated by a Deputy Head Teacher who says *‘Neglect can be the kind of, what we would see as the smaller issues, although they’re not, I know. But they are small issues – we get things like concerns about dirty ears, children saying they haven’t had breakfast, packed lunches are small, head lice is a big one. We get things...like that you can’t identify straight away as a kind of abuse. Physical [abuse] is quite easy, but these things are kind of bubbling along the bottom’*.

Here the co-occurrence of multiple adversities, combined with the complexity of what constitutes neglect lead to a belief that referrals for neglect alone are perceived as less likely to be accepted by social services. Literature purports that referrals made to social services which also include evidence of physical abuse are felt to be much more likely to receive consideration than referrals citing observations or worries of neglect

alone (Jonson-Reid et al. 2007; Tite 1993). Staff talk about their substantial frustration when making effective referrals to social services that are characterised by neglect. A Head Teacher expresses the challenge of assembling a neglect referral, *'...and that's where some of the frustration lies;...you know actually that there is something the matter...but there is no physical evidence...and that's the cases that are really difficult'*.

School staff's reliance on physical characteristics as evidence of neglect appeared to be a rational reaction to the systems within which they operate. In essence, the focus on physical characteristics was the dual product of lack of clarity about what constitutes neglect and their own expectations of engaging with social services. In addition to this, many school staff speak about the limitations of only 'seeing' children exist and function within a school or classroom setting. The visibility of neglect, was, as a result, referred to by staff as substantially narrower and more superficial (Horwath and Tarr 2015) than the wider information social workers can access under their statutory powers and visits to the family home (Ferguson 2011; Children Act 1989). The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) (Social Care Legislation in Wales, 2017b) sets out a legislative duty promoting co-operation between local authority social workers and a broad range of partner agencies to improve the well-being of children (Davies and Ward 2012). Such legal powers are not shared by staff in schools (Brown 2011), a point which is exemplified by a Special Needs Manager, *'I'm not in the home, I don't know; but I suppose I sit in meetings with the social worker who does go into the home...but as a classroom teacher, when the only contact you have is maybe a phone call or a parents evening- I wouldn't have a clue'*.

5.1.2 Lack of Wider Contextual Knowledge

Here the limited amount of contact the school staff feel they have with the child and their family outside of the school-setting and the lack of information about the home environment and conditions impacts upon school staff's knowledge of the child and ability to make informed professional judgements about whether, and to what extent, a child is living with neglect. A Learning Support Assistant says that colleagues who live within the local community have the advantage of acquiring knowledge about children's lives outside the school environment, *'maybe there are other concerns...you know, that they get to see outside of the school that we wouldn't necessarily know about...we only see and we only deal with the ones we see in school. But maybe they would have more information to add'*.

It is beyond dispute that some of the most consistent adults in a child's life, are in schools and are at the forefront of a child's overall safety and well-being (Brown 2011; Daniel 2008:7). Despite daily contact with the child, staff express that wider contextual knowledge about the child's life beyond the boundaries and scope of the school was inaccessible, which they felt restricted their ability to build a 'bigger picture' that would help more effectively safeguard the child (Thompson 2016:133). Local authority social workers, by comparison, function 'behind the scenes' with significant discretion (Witte et al. 2016). Social workers can be described as 'information processors' concerned with assembling, sharing and observing electronic information about the child (Parton 2009), from a broad range of agencies including health, education and the third sector, far beyond the constraints of what may be 'seen' during the school day.

Witte et al.'s (2016) reference to the 'electronic turn' highlights the differences that exist between the everyday visibility of the child in the school setting and the acknowledged (in)visibility of the child in statutory social work practice (Ferguson 2017). Unlike statutory social workers school staff do not have legal powers to access confidential information from a range of partner agencies. This inevitably means that school staff are solely reliant upon the visible indicators of neglect (Bandelet 2009; Thompson 2016), holding only partial knowledge from what is available and observable within the school day, often unaware of what life is like for the child outside of school (Horwath 2016).

5.2 Responding to Neglect in Schools

The second theme explores the 'professional relationships' which exist between school staff and staff in social services. Differences between the two fields of responsibility emerge in professional culture, language, consistency of advice, and agency thresholds for intervention. School staff emphasise the damaging impact of the social work profession's recruitment and retention problem (Munro 2011b; Research In Practice 2015; Stevenson 2017) on their roles when identifying child neglect. Many participants express exasperation when not being able to contact the child's allocated social worker, or receive updates on referrals. Staff also talk about the frequency in which the child's social worker is changed expressing the detriment this has on establishing effective inter-agency relationships with colleagues (Thompson 2016). An Assistant Head Teacher states, *'We'll phone up and that social worker doesn't work there anymore. Now I don't know whether they've left being a social worker or they've moved, or they've gone to a different Local Authority. But it seems to happen a lot. I can think of a number of cases where we've put in a referral at a real serious level, and within a three-month period a child has had four different social workers'*.

5.2.1 Resources & Relationships

Frustration also emerged in light of the national staff retention issue in social services and the impact the deficiency of social work resources had upon multi-agency relationships. A Pastoral Manager expresses, *'The sort of staffing crisis in social services doesn't help...you have social workers that move on, or who are overstretched, and as a result sometimes there can be breakdowns in information or in processes being actioned, where there's an interim social worker who doesn't know the child. Unfortunately, the lack of resources can have a major, major influence on how efficiently the cases are dealt with'*. Zlotnik et al. (2005) state that children's welfare is put at risk by statutory agencies' inability to successfully recruit and retain appropriate social work practitioners. In spite of significant resources and determination concentrated in this area, operational issues continue to present themselves, particularly in the field of statutory child protection practice (Baginsky 2013), with the lack of resources being one of the biggest struggles encountered in work on child neglect (Haynes 2015; Pithouse and Crowley 2016).

Causes of the profession's retention problem are suggested to include heavy practitioner caseloads (Lymbery 1998), poor management, salary and conditions, continuous cost-cutting (Balloch et al. 1999), low levels of training and support (Conrad and

Kellar-Guenther 2006). Conversely, school staff talk about the advantages of their consistent relationships with children and the benefits of regularly *seeing* children on a daily basis, perceiving social workers to have little time with the child and little understanding of the school's wider remit and role. Davies and Ward (2012: 48) refer to schools as locations which offer opportunities for staff to be conscious and responsive to problems. Social Workers however, in light of heavy caseloads and increasing managerial control (Lymbery 1998), are governed by detailed organisational procedures (Harris 1998; O'Reilly et al. 2011), with significantly fewer opportunities to see the child, or observe changes in their behaviour and development over time.

Staff also express irritation at not being sufficiently involved when safeguarding issues arise, feeling their familiarity with the child and was not sufficiently utilised by social workers despite holding extensive knowledge of the family. A teacher (and school Governor) states, *'I found the relationship between schools and social services very difficult, in that there's little relationship...we are with these children for six hours a day or more, five days a week, those children are in our care, yet in my experience we are not called upon or involved as much when there is a social issue'*. Frustration emerges when staff's knowledge of the child and expertise are not adequately recognised by social workers (Bradshaw 2000), who are often positioned as 'professional experts' when undertaking visits to investigate concerns of child neglect (Evetts 2003). School staff refer to the disregard they perceived social services to have for their established relationship with the child and family, and the daily accumulation of insight and knowledge about the community in which they reside. A Head Teacher says, *'We have a greater depth of knowledge about a family and then somebody from social services goes along once, who doesn't know the area or the family, they make this judgement obviously on this one visit!'*. Children living with neglect are not likely to seek support from statutory agencies, making school staff pivotal in their ability to respond to the issue and implement appropriate and timely support most effectively (Action for Children 2013; Turnbull 2015).

Effective child protection practice is fundamentally a multi-agency responsibility, reliant upon information about children being shared between professionals (Ferguson 2011). When school staff encounter responses from social services that are felt to be unsupportive or obstructive, or offered feedback which fails to recognise their knowledge and expertise, there is a risk that professional trust between agencies can be compromised (Guest 2008). School staff express confusion in completing effective referrals to social services. Having sought advice from social services, referrals are often later returned as 'no case to answer' or 'concerns unsubstantiated' (King and Scott 2012:1), with little or no feedback provided (Berry 2003). School staff say that their ability to reason the statutory response given (and then feed this forward into the decision to make future referrals) is consequently diminished.

Statutory social work practice with children can be characterised by accountability and regulations, with a focus upon routinised ways of working (Howe 1992; Lymbery 1998). These features can undermine staff confidence in working with statutory agencies and perpetuate beliefs about not making referrals of similar concern in the future (Guest 2008). A Teaching Assistant highlights the common perception that the responses received from social services are not only inconsistent, but lack feedback and communication about why they were not investigated, *'Sometimes you think "well, I*

was expecting that to come back again” and then you refer another one with more detail and you think “well that’s okay, that one I’ve covered every angle there”- and it bounces back!’. Inter-agency communication and information sharing can often be problematic, with schools commonly reporting long delays from statutory agencies for feedback or updates on their referrals (Baginsky 2000; Webster et al. 2005). This is supported by Richards (2017) who found that the experiences of designated safeguarding staff in primary schools in England, highlighted the limited quality and content of feedback provided by social workers to the staff member making the referral. The absence of clarification about why some cases met the social services’ threshold for intervention and some cases did not, left school staff feeling uncertain and confused, with limited understanding about why decisions were made. The Head of Inclusion in a secondary school states, *‘that’s one of the criticisms...we only get feedback if they’re picking it up. We don’t get the letter to say “Thanks very much for your referral, but on this occasion we’re not [intervening]”’.*

5.2.2 Inconsistency of Advice & Guidance

In addition to multi-agency information sharing, staff express exasperation with the lack of professional consistency within statutory agencies. Many staff describe instances where they sought advice and guidance from social services prior to completing a referral for child neglect, but remained confused by the lack of consistency in the outcome. In the following extract, a Head Teacher states *‘What I did find [is] different social workers, depending on who picked it up, there were different levels of concern and support within that. You work with one family and you’d have any support that they needed, straight away. Whereas some others were dismissive...it wasn’t like a level playing field: there wasn’t sort of consistency from social worker to social worker’.* In interviews staff also refer to the variance that exists between their constructions of child neglect and those held by social workers, and not having a shared understanding of neglect and the associated thresholds for intervention (Richards 2017).

Staff refer to the impact of social work language and operational categories, emphasising the challenge of divergent agency perspectives. A Head Teacher says *‘the social worker sees things from a different aspect and perspective to the teacher’.* Here variance emerges between understandings of child neglect; the broader definition of neglect (i.e. a child not having their basic needs met), and the tighter operational categories used within statutory agencies (Daniel 2011). Conceptual definitions of child neglect are based upon an understanding of the nature of the problem, whereas operational meanings aim to measure the severity and chronicity of the presenting problem in order to unlock access to scarce resources (Tang 2008). The disparity has the potential to create tensions across organisational boundaries, and barriers to the early identification of child neglect, particularly so, when professional relationships are not functioning effectively (Davies and Ward 2012; Ferguson 2011).

Understanding of operational categories and statutory agency frameworks can bring enhanced meaning to inter-professional practice to promote the safety and wellbeing of all children in schools. This is demonstrated by a teacher who states, *‘At the time, luckily, I was living with a social worker; and she gave me advice on how to track it [neglect] and how to record it. There does need to be more than just a grubby child, and I guess this is where our definitions come from; where we as a society, you know, -*

so children's services act on certain things, they don't act on others. They are working to their own definitions'. School staff also speak about how they perceive their concerns about a child to carry less weight and capture less attention from social workers than they had originally envisioned (Tupper et al. 2016). This draws attention to the central challenge of differing perspectives across services, and the need to ensure effective inter-professional communication when working with the complexity and socially constructed nature of child neglect.

6 Differing Perspectives: Implications for Inter-Agency Practice

The main finding of this study is the challenge of working with neglect across the two fields of professional responsibility. Although school staff commonly held ongoing concerns about children experiencing neglect, the way in which they identified its presence, and the point at which they decided to respond to the issue differed to staff in statutory services. In terms of identification, as would be anticipated, school staff encountered limitations in their ability to access wider contextual information about the child's home and community situations, restricting their capacity to build a comprehensive picture of a child beyond what they could *see* in the school day (such as inadequate clothing, hunger or poor hygiene). Contrastingly, social workers, although they have limited opportunity to observe children over time, they are able to assimilate a range of information from partner agencies and visit children in a range of environments to support professional judgement about whether a child has or is likely to experience neglect (including knowledge of missing health appointments, interactions with parent(s) or carer(s), and the home conditions).

With regard to the way in which school staff responded to concerns of neglect, when models of multi-agency working were observed within school-settings ($n = 5$), staff were supported by knowledge and expertise from a range of agency partners in their decision-making practice. However, within interviews the majority of staff reported experiencing challenges when making individual referrals to social services, which primarily included inability to articulate concerns of neglect rooted to intuition, and a lack of understanding of statutory threshold levels for service intervention. These findings support the consensus in literature which recommends the strengthening of the interprofessional partnership between the school and social services (Haynes et al. 2015; Pithouse and Crowley 2016; Stevens and Laing 2015; Stevenson 2005). Bridging practice across the two professional contexts would encourage a shared and preventative perspective which has the potential to combine both social and education safeguarding models. Facilitating inter-professional understandings of child neglect through two-way communication and feedback between practitioners in each setting, has the capacity to improve the safety and wellbeing of children.

At the individual and cultural level, it is recommended that Head Teachers are supported to nurture their staff's understandings of the barriers which impede successful inter-agency collaboration, as well as developing staff members' ability to identify indicators of child neglect by creating opportunities to work with social workers and discuss concerns in the context of statutory thresholds. This could be achieved through the implementation of 'communities of practice' (Wenger et al. 2004), which would provide a platform for staff to discuss referrals with colleagues who are more

experienced in safeguarding children, or undertake reflective sessions on situations of child neglect where a social worker can be invited to attend and facilitate discussion. These approaches could foster communication within the staff team, develop individuals' knowledge and expertise in child neglect practice in the specific school-setting, whilst increasing understanding about social services' operational categories and statutory thresholds for intervention. These recommendations are reinforced by the findings of the Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC, 2010) study into integrated working, which demonstrates how separate organisational training and development serves only to reinforce negative views about inter-agency practice. Providing staff in each setting with formal and informal opportunities to spend time in each others' agency would foster knowledge development on working effectively with child neglect and increase awareness of the other organisation's aims, terms, and approaches.

In terms of responding to differing agency perspectives across education and social safeguarding models at the structural level, the regular exchange of professional knowledge and skills between school staff and qualified social work practitioners is vital. That said, in the current climate of heavy social work caseloads (Lymbery 1998), detailed governance procedures and a focus on bureaucratic demands (Goodman and Trowler 2012), it is disingenuous to believe that the workloads of front-line child protection workers could be increased to include this work in schools. Particularly so, in the broader context of the national social work recruitment and retention problem (Munro 2011b; Research In Practice 2015), when the profession's focus upon performance management easily overshadows the importance of direct work with families and early intervention services (Stevenson 2017). It is also naïve to suggest that teachers should be laden with additional social and welfare duties outside of the classroom in addition to extensive teaching responsibilities (Webb and Vulliamy 2001).

However, one of the three local authorities participating in the study demonstrated a valuable example of good inter-agency practice with the implementation of the School Social Worker role. This role supported a specific school catchment area by providing statutory support to children and families, whilst also offering school staff advice, guidance, and aspects of safeguarding training. School staff reported how the role enhanced their relationship with, and improved their understanding of, social service departments and statutory procedures. The post creates a dialogue about the content and clarity of referrals made by the school to social services, nurtures inter-professional relationships between staff at the individual level, whilst fostering professional trust and information sharing across agencies.

Whilst the role is still in its infancy in Wales, and as such, yet to be evaluated, it appears to provide an effective framework for early and preventative practice, linking a wide range of school staff with a designated social worker to collaboratively identify and intervene in cases of suspected neglect. This is echoed by Haynes et al. (2015) who recommend the employment of locality-based social workers to work with schools in supporting the relationship with statutory services in the United Kingdom, and Widmark et al's (2011) study into the barriers to collaboration between health, social services and schools in Sweden, that recommends the importance of practitioners from different organisations fully collaborating, so as to facilitate a comprehensive approach to service delivery when supporting children and families.

7 Conclusion

This paper has presented two themes connected by the narrative of differing perspectives which runs throughout the findings of this mixed methods study. The first theme discussed was the ‘identification of neglect in schools’ which highlighted staff’s reliance upon *seeing* neglect on a child, particularly in the absence of the school’s access to wider contextual knowledge outside of the school day. The theme emphasised the positioning of the school within the community which enabled a range of staff to establish long-term relationships with, and relate to children in familiar ways, to keep them safe and protected from harm (Ferguson 2017), by gathering tangible evidence to legitimise referrals to social services. The second theme discussed ‘responding to neglect in schools’ and accentuated the significance of the relationship between the school and social services, with staff expressing different professional understandings of neglect to social workers who were perceived as ‘experts’ (Evetts 2003). Contrasting language and operational categories further compounded difficulties with inter-agency communication and statutory practice. Different professional functions were identified as contextualising uneven decision-making within each field of responsibility; school staff had much more contact with the child in their roles than social work practitioners, but much less opportunity to access wider information about the child, interactions with their family, community and the conditions of the home.

Findings from this study offer important messages for other professionals working to safeguard children through a partnership with children’s statutory services. Although the strengths of working across services to safeguard children are beyond dispute (Davies and Ward 2012; Haynes 2015; Stevenson 2005), this study provides new and original evidence which emphasises the significance of effective inter-professional collaboration across a broad range of agencies. Sidebotham et al.’s (2016:11) triennial analysis of Serious Case Reviews ‘Pathways to Harm, Pathways to Protection’ identifies ‘pressure points’ which exist at the boundary into, and out of, statutory services, where cases are ‘stepped up’ from universal services such as schools into statutory support, and ‘stepped down’ from child protection process to other agencies for ongoing monitoring. The review highlights inter-professional working as vital to effective safeguarding practice and identifies communication between services as an inescapable point where breakdown commonly occurs. Consequently, focusing upon the communication interface where school staff make, and social services receive, referrals about children they suspect of living with neglect (Pithouse and Crowley 2016) has the potential to develop and improve the early and timely identification of neglect through collaborative practice.

Effective inter-professional communication requires that staff in both settings hold a clear knowledge of the systems and processes that govern the other agency, awareness of organisational cultures, professional curiosity in the sharing of information and asking of questions between services, and a common understanding of local authority thresholds and service intervention pathways. Findings from this study offer key messages for individual practice when working with neglect. Whilst local authorities are known to play the lead role in safeguarding children, it is important to remember that it is everyone’s responsibility to protect children from harm (Taylor and Daniel 2005; Welsh Government 2016). With this in mind, all practitioners should seek opportunities to build their individual relationships with colleagues in a range of

organisations. Visiting partner agency premises can help develop working relationships whilst also supporting the sharing of concerns about children.

Whilst individual agencies bring different perspectives of a child's circumstances to the collaborative safeguarding process, it is important to consider how these diverse perspectives can be harnessed to improve not only the standard of practice and protection provided to the child, but the child's experience of the service (Community Care 2009). Communication between staff in universal services and statutory services can be strengthened by using threshold guidance documents to support conversations with social services when there are concerns that a child is suspected of living with neglect. The local authorities' threshold guidance documents are an essential safeguarding tool which set out levels of support and pathways for intervening in harm and abuse to safeguard children (HM Government 2018). The document can be used to ask questions about threshold levels for intervention, unpick differing professional language, assist with the articulation of concerns across agencies, explore individual perceptions, and improve communication by scaffolding inter-professional decision-making practice.

Although the research was undertaken within local authorities in Wales, the paper offers transferrable messages for broader practice contexts both in the United Kingdom and globally. Findings presented from this study also reflect key findings in the Munro review of child protection practice (2011a, b), emphasising the growing body of evidence which reiterates the value of early intervention and prevention when working with children and families, compared to reactive services in the context of continued austerity and increasing cuts to local authority spending in the United Kingdom (Featherstone et al. 2018). In summary, this paper argues for the prioritisation of schools as pivotal sites for responding to child neglect through inter-professional collaboration.

The central and universal positioning of schools is key to effective neglect-practice, located at the heart of the community they provide a consistent, accessible, and supportive environment throughout a child's schooling. Staff have the ability to observe a child's development, witness interactions between the child and their parents either end of the school day, and monitor their health, safety and wellbeing, being in a particularly advantageous position for children to seek help and support from adults they may trust. Staff's expertise and knowledge of children over an extended period of time, offer rich insights when making decisions about when support is needed, and what type and level of support is appropriate. This makes the safeguarding role of school staff as a collective group, highly valuable in the effective delivery of collaborative safeguarding practice.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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